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Merops oreobates (Sharpe 1892): a monotypic species or not?

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Prior to Fry's (1969) major contribution on the evolution and systematics of bee-eaters, it had been generally accepted by most authors including Jackson & Sclater (1938), Chapin (1939), Peters (1945), Boetticher (1951) and White (1965) that Cinnamon-chested Bee-eater *Merops oreobates* (Sharpe 1892) is nothing more than a race of *M. lafresnayii* Guérin-Méneville, 1843. However, Grant & Mackworth-Praed (1937) had considered (mainly on morphological grounds) that *lafresnayii* more closely resembles Blue-breasted Bee-eater *M. variegatus* Vieillot, 1817, than *M.l. oreobates*, and had proposed that *lafresnayii* be considered a race of *variegatus*, thereby leaving *M. oreobates* a distinct monotypic species of the East African highlands. This position was subsequently followed by Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1952) but clearly rejected by White (1965). More recently, Fry (1984), Fry *et al.* (1988), Fry (2001) and Dickinson (2003) have all followed Grant & Mackworth-Praed (1937) and Fry (1969) in considering *lafresnayii* a race of *variegatus*.

Throughout the greater part of its range in West, Central and East Africa, *M. variegatus* is a bird of damp lowland grassland and lakeside vegetation (Chapin 1939, Benson *et al.* 1971, Britton 1980, Zimmerman *et al.* 1996, Dowsett *et al.* 2008), but the subspecies *M. v. bangweoloensis* does reach 2,000 m in swampy areas of the Ufipa Plateau, south-west Tanzania (D. Moyer & R. J. Dowsett pers. comm.). This is in direct contrast with *M. oreobates*, which throughout its range is a montane species of open forest, forest edges and woodlands at 1,600–2,300 m (Zimmerman *et al.* 1996). In Ethiopia *lafresnayii* is largely confined to the Rift Valley and adjacent highlands, favouring a variety of forest habitats between 530 m and 1,830 m (Ash & Atkins 2009).

Morphologically, *lafresnayii* is intermediate between *variegatus* and *oreobates*, being closer to the former in coloration, but nearer the latter in size and habitat preference. Vocalisations of *lafresnayii* are reportedly identical to those of *oreobates* but totally unlike *variegatus* (B. Finch pers. comm.). In Chappuis (2000) some vocals of *variegatus* are either a rather hard *klup, klup*, or slightly softer and more prolonged (e.g., a pair displaying), in contrast to the vocals of *oreobates* which are much higher pitched. Van Someren (1922) had commented that specimens of *oreobates* from the Turkwell (Gorge) area of north-west Kenya are sometimes very like Ethiopian birds, having the blue forehead, supercilium and neck-

patch. Recent photographs of birds in typical *oreobates* habitat at Malewa River Lodge, at 2,200 m, in the central Rift Valley of Kenya north of Lake Naivasha, and from Kakamega Forest (1,700 m) in western Kenya show birds with a prominent blue supercilium and, in the case of the Malewa bird, a bright violet-blue neck-band.

Fry (1984) posed the question: 'is the large blue-gorgeted bird in the highlands of Ethiopia (*lafresnayii*) conspecific with the large black-gorgeted one in the highlands further south (*oreobates*), or with the small blue-gorgeted one of neighbouring lowlands (*variegatus*)?'. Clearly inclining to the latter view, he felt that the two highland forms were independent derivatives of lowland *M. variegatus*, the Ethiopian population more recently so than the East African form on account of it showing similar characters (colour of forehead, supercilium and neck-band). Nevertheless, Fry (1984) doubted that unanimity would ever be reached on this problem, and that further revision might be necessary in the future.

While it is probable that *oreobates* and *lafresnayii* are independently derived from *variegatus*, with components of *variegatus* appearing in both highland forms (not just *lafresnayii* as earlier thought by Grant & Mackworth-Praed, and Fry), with clear vocal and habitat differences between *variegatus* and the other two, surely *oreobates* can no longer be considered a monotypic species confined to the montane forests of East Africa? With *lafresnayii* having priority, *oreobates* would revert to *Merops lafresnayii oreobates* (Sharpe, 1892) following White (1965). Meanwhile, it is hoped that DNA sequencing of both forms will be possible in the near future.

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